

Will Foreign Policy Be a Campaign Issue in 2012?

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As the 2012 presidential campaign begins to take shape it is striking, and probably even more so to non-Americans, how little attention is being paid to foreign policy in the campaign. There is, of course, some criticism of President Barack Obama's foreign policy, but it is mostly moderate and fairly generic, usually along the lines of viewing Obama as insufficiently loyal to America's friends around the world and not fully aware of potential threats. This criticism, however, is not intense or central to the Republican campaigns.

There are two reasons for this. First, most American campaigns are dominated by domestic issues, specifically the economy. Accordingly, in 2012 the major Republican candidates will seek to persuade voters that Obama has done little to fix the American economy while driving the country deeper into debt while the Democrats will argue that the President is slowly turning things around and pulling the country out of the fiscal and economic ditch into which his predecessor, President George W. Bush, had driven it.

The second reason is that in 2012, unlike in the last two presidential campaigns, the parties are not divided on any major foreign policy issues. The winding down/continuation of the war in Iraq, the ongoing war in Afghanistan and even the recently begun intervention in Libya have not divided American elites on party lines, or really at all. The elite consensus, or near consensus on these questions leaves little room for these major foreign policy issues to become important in the campaign. Other important foreign policy issues including the question of what the U.S. response to growing global Chinese influence, or increased competition in other parts of the world are insufficiently immediate to become issues in the campaign either.

On balance this is a very fortunate stroke of luck for President Obama, not because he has handled foreign policy particularly poorly, he hasn't, but because in 2012 any sitting president would be vulnerable to an opponent who was against the elite consensus on the three wars and the direction of foreign policy generally and campaigned accordingly. A credible Republican candidate who could differentiate him or herself from President Obama and the Republican field, by, for example, opposing the intervention in Libya, calling for withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2013 and for adapting a different strategy for keeping America safe that did not require quite as large, expensive and dangerous global presence, would likely be tapping a rich vein of voter support in both a Republican primary and a general election. This approach would appeal to voters ranging from avid Tea Partiers to liberals who are currently part of Obama's political base.

The anger that has fueled the Tea Party movement, and much of the Republican comeback in 2010, is targeted at elite institutions generally including Wall Street and the government. The Republican Party obviously must limit its populist appeal to anti-

government sentiment as it remains the party of business and the wealthy. Reinforcing anti-government anger by implicitly attacking the foreign policy elite would help a Republican candidate stand out from the rest of the primary field as being the candidate with the strongest anti-government credentials and would be present a greater challenge to Obama in the general election by forcing the President to defend his policies in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan. In some respects it is these issues on which Obama is most vulnerable, particularly from voters who are otherwise inclined to support his reelection bid. Thus far, the only potential candidate who has done this is Libertarian Republican Ron Paul, but Paul's appeal has remained limited to his small, but committed base. A more gifted Republican politician with a stronger campaign and bigger war chest could benefit from co-opting Paul's message and making it his own.

American politics in the post-Bush era have again entered a period where there is, for the most part, a foreign policy consensus between the two major parties. This consensus, however, is not held throughout the electorate creating an opening for a clever White House aspirant who is willing not just to take on President Obama, but the leadership of the Republican Party as well. If this candidate does not emerge, it is likely that foreign policy will remain in the background throughout the 2012 campaign.